

"There's only one way to truly learn how to kickbox -- at the center of the sun," said Soledeto.

"Kickboxing at the center of the sun?" Max replied, shocked.

"Yes, at the center of the sun," Soledeto assured him.

Max let it sink in. He was going to learn how to kickbox at the center of the sun.

"See, the sun's rays provide vital rejuvenance to the mind, heart, and soul," Soledeto explained.

"What about the body?" Max asked.

"Yes, that too. I forgot about the body." Soledeto turned away as he began to gently arrange items around the room.

"What about, ya know... other stuff?" Max questioned.

"Oh, you mean your ... ? Yes, I supposed it will rejuvenate that as well. But you'll just have to go there to find out for sure!" And with that, Soledeto silently motioned for Max to follow him.

The two friends walked down the same tan-tiled hallway they'd walked down thousands of times, to and from training sessions. They passed the bathroom they'd both used thousands of times to relieve themselves and stare into the mirror while quietly testing out flexing poses. And they passed the bedroom where Soledeto had slept thousands of times (and Max had slept once, but that was after a rare night of heavy drinking and neither of the friends spoke of that evening ever again).

Finally, they reached the door. You know, THE DOOR. The one that was foreshadowed earlier in this story. The door that was "never to be opened" by Max. The door that was "only for those who had truly transcended the physical capabilities of what the body can achieve." Of course, what Soledeto had so artfully left off the end of that phrase was, "what the body can achieve... on Earth."

The teacher jiggled the door's handle. It was locked, as usual. And Soledeto must have forgotten his key.

Or not, Max thought to himself as he watched his instructor raise a hand up high and bring it crashing down on the door's handle. Max was confused, thinking that maybe the old man had finally lost it and this whole kickboxing at the center of the sun business was just the first of

many insane declarations. As Max pondered his impending future as the caretaker of an insane kickboxing master, the door made an uncomfortably loud creaking noise.

Max jumped backwards, surprised by the odd sound (and afraid for his own safety). Soledeto leaned back and thumped the doorknob again, this time with an upwards striking motion. That was followed by an elbow to the center of the knob and a left leg roundhouse to the knob's casing. Now, completely confident that his master had lost his mind, Max reached forward to restrain Soledeto before the doorknob decided to fight back.

But right before Max's fingers could touch the ivory-colored robes of his instructor, the doorknob gave way. It turned slightly to the right with a slow jerking motion. And then a horrid sound noise was made audible as door's hinges -- unused for countless years -- jumped to life and flexed with all their might. Old and exhausted, the hinges only to heaved open a small crevice between the edge of the door and the door frame. But that meager opening was more than enough for Soledeto to finish his impressive combination of skilled moves with a blow to the door's solar plexus, causing the mysterious room to finally reveal itself.

Light emanated from the from the room as if it were an echo chamber for the sun's rays. Strange symbols marked the brown tiled floor, while the walls glowed a warm shade of tan. Windows smothered the room's edges, and a large angled skylight poked through the ceiling.

"I know I've barely prepared you for this," Soledeto said as he placed his hand on Max's shoulder. "But now is the time. We're going on a trip, you and I, and it's not going to be very comfortable. In fact, it's going to be fucking horrendous."

Max wanted to say something. He really did. Maybe I should tell him I'm not ready to be in this room, he thought. Maybe I haven't "transcended the physical capabilities of what the body can achieve." Maybe I'm... scared.

But Max's maybes took too long. Before the young fighter could even open his mouth, Soledeto was halfway through an odd but elegant dance. It was a synthesis of every martial arts technique Max had ever seen before. It had the fluidity of capoeira and the grace of karate. It had the strength of tae kwon do and the agility of kung-fu. Everything together in one, like some sort of melting pot of martial arts moves.

Suddenly, a beam sunlight shot down through the skylight. And to Max's surprise, the light was a physical structure in the most tangible sense. In fact, it was nearly rock hard. It had shot down through the skylight, landed on the ground, and solidified itself without a sound.

While Max pondered the ramifications of this eerie light, Soledeto's dance intensified. It became so fervent, in fact, that the walls began to vibrate. A pulse emanated from the inside of the room and Max began to feel the ground tremble slightly beneath his feet.

"Come now, Max," Soledeto said in between quick breaths. "It's time for us to begin our trip."